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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
"*****"

Well, so much for finishing up my fall clean-up of leaves! It's pretty tough raking up leaves that are buried beneath a few inches of snow, or blowing around on top of it! Yep, winter has arrived, and I'm none too happy about it! In fact, we're getting another batch of flurries right now. Gee, it's only early-December!

Okay, so it isn't that strange, especially with the holidays rapidly approaching. And yes, the temperatures have been bone-chilling over the past couple of weeks. I guess it was inevitable.

So, as I make sure that I'm properly "layered" with warm clothing, I'm trying to figure out where we stand regarding our holiday shopping. As far as I can figure, we're just about done. We're not going crazy this year - not that we go overboard any year - but things are tighter than usual this year. And everything is going up in price lately, that it's tough to splurge. Sure, we did get each other something nice, but most of our gifts will be more "necessity"-related than fun stuff. It usually works out that way every year anyway. So, maybe one more weekend to pick up a few last-minutes things and we can stop worrying about it and enjoy the next couple of weeks comfortably. I have to save my strength for any more snowstorms that might decide to make their way east!

Until next time...

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'Chiptune' Artists Make Music Of Obsolete Computing

Haeyoung Kim, a classical pianist, took the stage at a hip Manhattan art space before a crowd of twenty- and thirty-somethings, many shaggy-haired and wearing T-shirts and glasses.

As her performance began, the room filled with electronic beeps and buzzes of a 1980's video game pulsing to a danceable beat, as if Mario were hosting a rave. As heads bopped in the audience, Kim proudly held up her instrument: a Nintendo Game Boy.

The performance on a recent Friday was part of Blip Festival, a four-day celebration of music made with obsolete computers and electronics.

So-called "chiptune" or "8-bit" music is building a cult audience among former Atari jockeys.

"We are the first generation for whom video games and computers played an important role in our childhood," said Mike Rosenthal, 29, one of Blip Festival's organizers. "Now that sound has taken on meaning, and many of us are at an age where we want to take apart our toys and see what else we can make them do."

Chiptune includes pop, metal and other styles. The electronic, tinny sound of the first commercial video games has aged enough to feel nostalgic: The eclectic artist Beck has even released an EP of chiptune remixes.

The small chiptune community exists largely online through file-swapping and on bulletin boards, and events like Blip are rare. Some artists came from as far as Europe and Japan to perform. A few fans traveled that far to watch.

The scene is informed by the do-it-yourself ethic of punk rock and hacker culture, and many artists rely on jury-rigged gadgets. Favorites include the Commodore 64 and Atari 800, but the most popular chiptune gadget may be the Game Boy, the monochrome handheld device Nintendo debuted in 1989. The instruments have only a fraction of the computing power of today's average cellphone, but that's part of the appeal.

"It makes you more creative to work within the tight limitations of the technology," said Jordi Huguet, one half of the Barcelona-based chiptune duo Yes, Robot.

"Yesterday's technology tends to get lost. Using it to make something new is part of the challenge," he added. His gig case contains several Game Boys, a toy voice changer and a Texas Instruments Speak & Spell with about a dozen new switches and dials attached.

Proving that chiptune is about more than nostalgia, a few Blip attendees were too young to remember the gadgets that inspired it.

"I've always liked video game music. I think it's cool," said Long Island resident Emily Corvi, 13, who was escorted to the show by her mother. "I didn't even think this music was possible."

There also is an element of subversion; the artists are playing with the cons of their youth and breaking the boundaries of what the technology was designed to do.

"People like tweaking the corporate nose. When you make music with a Nintendo NES, Nintendo isn't telling you what to do with it," said New York-based Chris Burke, who performs as glomag.

"But we love what Atari and Nintendo made. This music is more of an homage than anything else."

Because chiptune artists' instruments are often more than 20 years old, they often break down, adding unpredictability to performances. Indeed, the power cut out several times during Kim's performance, prompting the crowd to cheer even louder.

Kim, who performs as Bubblyfish, said she discovered chiptune while studying electronic music at the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

co-CEO Derek Anderson. "They're of equal importance, and we want both to be of the same quality and be the same compelling experience."

"Terminator" will not be the only franchise in the Halcyon Games stable. Halcyon created a splash this year when it secured first-look rights to the works for famed science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. The Halcyon executives said they are looking at bringing out titles based on the Dick books beginning in 2010. Previous screen adaptations of Dick's work, including "Total Recall," "Minority Report," "A Scanner Darkly" and "Blade Runner," have grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide.

Take-Two CEO: Video Game Mergers "Inevitable"

Take-Two Interactive Software Chief Executive Ben Feder said on Monday consolidation in the \$40 billion video-game industry is inevitable as growth continues.

Feder, whose comment came a day after Vivendi said it would take control of Activision Inc in a \$9.9 billion deal, noted the cost to develop a game was very close to the outlay for production and marketing of a Hollywood film in the early 1990s.

The advent of new gaming hardware with high-definition graphics and online capabilities has sent game production costs soaring in recent years, with top titles thought to cost \$30 million or more.

"I do believe that consolidation ultimately is inevitable," Feder said at a UBS investment conference.

"Video-game development is not getting any cheaper. It's a capital-intensive business, and I don't see that going away. That will drive some of the smaller competitors out."

Shares in Take-Two, which makes the mega-hit "Grand Theft Auto" franchise, rose 8.7 percent to close at \$16.28 on Monday as the Vivendi-Activision deal boosted investor optimism that other publishers could be takeover targets.

Group Cites Growing Video Game Violence

Graphic scenes of gunshot victims spurting blood and a man urinating into a prisoner's cell are included among the 10 video games that a media watchdog group warns should be avoided by kids and teens under 17.

With the holiday shopping season in full swing, the National Institute on Media and the Family presented its 12th annual video game report card Tuesday to help parents decide what games are appropriate for their children.

"There's an endless stream of new games that will never be suitable for children," said Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., who joined institute officials and other lawmakers at a news conference.

Efforts to protect children from the dangers posed by excessively violent

video games have not kept pace with growth of the video game industry, the institute said.

Institute officials cited "growing complacency" among game retailers, parents and the gaming industry on video game ratings.

"Unfortunately, we're seeing some steps backwards," said institute president David Walsh.

Walsh said fewer retailers, for example, are participating in efforts to educate their customers and employers about the video game ratings.

The institute, a media watchdog group, cited figures showing that nearly half of kids between 8 and 12 have played M-rated games intended for those 17 and over.

But the industry's Entertainment Software Rating Board, which assigns game ratings, defended the effectiveness of its program.

"At a time of year when parents are looking for helpful guidance about video games, this year's report card does little more than sow unwarranted doubt about effective tools like ESRB ratings," said ESRB president Patricia Vance.

Vance said a recent Federal Trade Commission report called the ESRB rating system useful and informative for parents.

The institute showed gory scenes of sword, gun and knife violence from several video games. A scene from "Assassin's Creed" depicts an attacker plunging a knife into his victim's back several times. A man in "Manhunt 2" taunts a prisoner by urinating into the man's cell. A fallen victim's body is riddled with gunfire as blood spurts across the screen in "The Darkness."

The group's list of 10 "games to avoid," all M-rated, are in the video game report card on its Web site, <http://www.mediafamily.org>, along with a list of recommended games for kids and teens.

Universities Bring Video Games Into Classrooms

Many parents wish their kids would spend less time at the computer playing games and messaging, and concentrate more on homework, sports or family activities.

One university professor, however, has come up with a combined solution that would integrate educational role-playing video games into the classroom.

Doug Thomas, an associate professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, is developing a game for students ages 10 to 12 that aims to teach ideas and skills not found in traditional textbooks.

"Because games are experiential they might be good at teaching things that you learn through experience, and that are difficult to teach through books," Thomas said in an interview.

His game, "Modern Prometheus," uses the story of "Frankenstein" to teach ethical decision making. The player assumes the role of Dr. Frankenstein's assistant, who is forced to make a series of difficult choices that impact the game's outcome.

To complicate matters, Thomas and his team added a twist - the assistant must help the doctor cure a plague that is threatening the town's residents. One dilemma is whether or not to steal body parts from a cemetery - a key requirement for curing the disease.

"Stealing a brain is hard to justify ethically, but doing all this work that seems kind of shady in the present is actually going to save the town in the long run," Thomas said.

"We want them to really wrestle with doing things and ask 'Is it good for me, or is it good for everyone else?' There is no right way or wrong way to play it," he explained.

The aim, Thomas said, is for students to play the hour-long game individually, then discuss the choices they made with their teachers and classmates.

"It's not just a game but also the conversation that happens around it," Thomas said. "When kids play games they don't just play them, they also talk about them with each other. There's a huge amount of informal learning that goes on."

One challenge for "Modern Prometheus" and other classroom games is finding teachers willing to incorporate them in their lesson plans.

"It's really hard for teachers to work with an unfamiliar technology that the kids know more about than they do," Thomas said. "They feel like 'my job is hard enough already.'"

He also acknowledges that the game doesn't quite fit into many established middle-school curricula.

To overcome that obstacle, Thomas is collaborating with Indiana University Professor Sasha Barab, whose "Quest Atlantis" game is used by 4,500 students around the world. Currently in beta testing, "Modern Prometheus" is expected to be in some U.S. classrooms by spring.

The ultimate goal, Thomas said, would be to allow many players to experience and interact with one another inside the game. That could mean creating an environment for "Modern Prometheus" in a place like the virtual world Second Life, Thomas said.

That way, the game could reach a wider audience and potentially appeal to older teens, who are more fickle about what games they will play.

"It's not 'Halo 3,' but for the age group we are working with now it's pretty good," Thomas said. "We'd love to have it scale for a wider audience, but teenagers are the toughest because they are resistant to everything."

A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

PDF Approved As International Standard

Adobe PDF (Portable Document Format) 1.7 has been approved as an international standard by the International Standards Organization (ISO), according to a company executive.

"Adobe has received word that the ballot for approval of PDF 1.7 to become the ISO 32000 Standard ... has passed by a vote of 13-1," wrote Jim King, a senior principal scientist and PDF architect at Adobe, in a blog post Tuesday.

After announcing its intentions to make PDF a standard in January, Adobe submitted PDF to the ISO's Technical Committee in July. Previously, specialized subsets of PDF - PDF/Archive and PDF/Exchange - have been approved as standards by ISO, and other subsets have been proposed as standards. The approval of PDF 1.7 will now serve as an "umbrella" standard that will help unify these different subsets.

The ratification of PDF as an ISO standard means Adobe gives up some control over the development of future versions. Instead of setting the future path of PDF on its own, Adobe will just be one of several parties with a say in how the standard evolves. And that's exactly what King, who was nominated technical editor of the new standard, hopes to see happen.

"The challenging part will be to get people to participate in the next release of the standard. Lots of people want standards but it takes a measurable resource commitment to participate," he wrote.

Young Europeans Prefer Internet To TV

Young Europeans prefer the Internet over television, and nearly half say they watch less TV because of surfing the web, a poll of 10 European countries showed Wednesday.

More than 7,000 people were questioned as part of the survey released by the European Interactive Advertising Association (EIAA).

For the first time in the survey, the Internet came ahead of television among 16- to 24-year-olds. Some 82 percent said they go online between five and seven days a week, while 77 percent watch television that often, a five-percent decrease from last year.

Forty-eight percent said their TV consumption had dropped as a result of the Internet.

The research also found that a total of 57 percent of Europeans access the Internet regularly each week, or 169 million people across the countries surveyed.

The countries were Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden.

The average amount of time spent online among those surveyed was 11.9 hours per week. Italy was the highest with 13.6 hours, followed by Sweden at 13. The Netherlands was last at 9.8 hours.

Eighty-three percent of those surveyed said they could not live without at least one online activity, with 32 percent saying email was indispensable to them.

Seniors and women are increasingly using the Internet, the poll also showed, with a 12-percent increase among those over 55 and an eight-percent jump for women.

House Ups Penalties On Internet Porn

Internet service providers would be given specific responsibilities to report child pornography on their sites and face tough penalties for not doing so under a bill passed Wednesday by the House.

The House also approved a bill to double spending for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a private, nonprofit group created in 1984 with a congressional mandate to act as a clearinghouse for child abduction and sexual exploitation cases.

The first bill, passed 409-2, expands the reporting duties of Internet service providers with respect to violations of child sexual exploitation and pornography laws. The ISPs would have to inform the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children of the Internet identity and geographic location of suspected sex offenders and the time child pornography was downloaded.

They also would have to preserve child pornography images for investigations and prosecutions.

ISPs that fail to report incidents of child pornography would be subject to fines of \$150,000 per image per day, up from the current \$50,000. The penalty would jump to \$300,000, double the current rate, for subsequent cases.

With this greater accountability, "we have taken the first step toward supporting parents in their efforts to protect their children; our combined efforts will help make the Internet a safer place," said Rep. Nick Lampson, D-Texas, sponsor of the bill and founder of the House Missing and Exploited Children Caucus.

Lampson was joined at an earlier news conference by John Walsh, host of the TV show "America's Most Wanted" and founder of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "These two bills will put some teeth into the battle against child pornography and the people who produce it, the people who distribute it, the people who buy it and the people who use it as a form of child abuse," Walsh said.

The second bill, passed 408-3, doubles to \$40 million a year through 2013 the amount of federal funds available to the center, which works in partnership with the Justice Department, the FBI and other federal

agencies to prevent child abuse and aid its victims. Actual money for the center still has to be determined in annual spending bills.

Since 1984, the center has assisted law enforcement with more than 135,800 missing child cases, resulting in the recovery of some 118,700 children. It also operates the congressionally mandated CyberTipline, which since 1998 has handled more than 540,000 phone calls and leads dealing with child pornography, online enticement of children, sexual tourism involving children and child victims of prostitution.

The House votes Wednesday followed action last month on a half-dozen bills aimed at making it easier to monitor and prosecute cyber crimes against juveniles and to educate children about online dangers. All the bills must be considered by the Senate before going to the president for his signature.

Microsoft Softens Response to Piracy

Microsoft Corp. is pulling back from a system that disables programs on users' computers if it suspects the software is pirated, opting instead for a gentler approach based on nagging alerts.

Microsoft said late Monday it will roll out the new version of Windows Genuine Advantage with the first "service pack" for Windows Vista, due in the first quarter of 2008.

When computer users activate a copy of Windows Vista or try to download certain software from Microsoft's Web site, the Windows Genuine Advantage system scans their PCs for signs of pirated software. Today, if the tool finds an unauthorized copy of Vista, the glassy Vista user experience disappears and other features are suspended.

In the new version, PC users found to have a pirated copy of Vista will continue to be able to use their computers, but with unmistakable signs their operating system is a fake. The desktop wallpaper will turn black, and a white notice will appear alerting users to the problem. Each time they log in, they will be prompted to buy legitimate software, and every hour, a reminder bubble will appear on the screen.

Users with a high tolerance for irritation can put off switching to genuine software indefinitely, but those who relent and buy a real copy of Windows can do so at reduced prices - \$119 for Windows Vista Home Premium, half the regular retail price.

"We want to make sure unwitting victims get a great treatment," said Mike Sievert, a corporate vice president in Microsoft's Windows marketing group.

Windows Genuine Advantage collects several pieces of information about a PC during the check, including the serial number on the hard drive and its IP address, but Sievert says none of that can be used to identify individual PC users.

In August, the Windows Genuine Advantage team at Microsoft accidentally updated its servers with computer code that wasn't quite ready for prime time. As a result, Microsoft said "fewer than 12,000" people who tried to validate software over a two-day period couldn't.

Some found legitimate copies of Windows hobbled after the tool labeled them pirated, and an outcry spread across Web forums and technology news sites.

Sievert said the glitch in August was unrelated to the change in how the Windows Genuine Advantage tool will work.

"Microsoft realizes it has to take a different approach with their customers," said Chris Swenson, a software industry analyst for market researcher NPD Group. "If you shut down someone's computer, you're going to anger customers."

Microsoft also said Monday the package of Vista updates will fix two holes in the operating system that have allowed pirates to create counterfeit copies - one that mimics the activation of software by computer makers before a PC is sold, and one that extends a grace period given to people who install new software, before they must activate it.

Sievert said Microsoft plans to offer an update for Windows Genuine Advantage that will run the piracy check regularly without the computer user initiating the process.

Microsoft Spikes Dirty Santa Bot

Microsoft Corp. quickly shut down Santa Claus' Web privileges after it found out the automated elf it created for kids to instant message with was talking naughty, not nice.

Last year, Microsoft encouraged kids to connect directly to "Santa" by adding northpole@live.com to their Windows Live Messenger contact lists. The Santa program, which Microsoft reactivated in early December, asked children what they wanted for Christmas and could respond on topic, thanks to artificial intelligence.

The holiday cheer soured this week when a reader of a United Kingdom-based technology news site, The Register, reported that a chat between Santa and his underage nieces about eating pizza prompted Santa to bring up oral sex.

One of the publication's writers replicated the chat Monday. After declining the writer's repeated invitations to eat pizza, a frustrated Santa burst out with, "You want me to eat what?!? It's fun to talk about oral sex, but I want to chat about something else."

The exchange ended with the writer and Santa calling each other "dirty bastard."

Microsoft spokesman Adam Sohn said the company's engineers tried to clean up Santa's vocabulary, but even after making changes to the software, the company wasn't comfortable keeping him online.

"It's not like if you say, 'Hello Santa,' he's going to throw inappropriate stuff at you," said Sohn.

Sohn said Santa's lewd comment was sparked by someone "pushing this thing

to make it do things it wasn't supposed to do."

Santa is just one of many "agents," or automated IM programs, that computer users can chat with on Live Messenger. Some are useful - customer service agents, for example - while others are frivolous, like an alien that responds to IMs with burbling extraterrestrial noises. Sohn said some of the bots are programmed to fend off inappropriate messages.

"If they're meant to be cheeky and have fun with you, they may repeat certain things back," he said, or respond to certain words with "that's naughty."

Sohn said Microsoft was not aware that the Santa code included the foul language, but insisted the company did not suspect an employee prank.

Microsoft disabled Santa Tuesday. On Wednesday, northpole@live.com appeared to be online in one reporter's Messenger contact list, but Santa did not respond to her messages.

Dumb Cyber-Crook Leaves Behind ID Clues

When Chris Boyd, senior director of malware research at FaceTime Security Labs, stumbled upon a collection of stolen credit cards in a Warez forum, he saw something he didn't expect - a photo.

But not only that, the poster also listed his or her supposed location underneath his or her forum avatar.

It was a first for Boyd, who said there were about 150 separate pieces of data in the collection. The poster's location was given as Greece, though most of the credit card information seemed to come from the United States. U.S. law enforcement agencies have been contacted, Boyd said.

Assuming the photo and location information is correct, authorities at least have the "Who" and the "Where" bases partly covered, leaving a more interesting question to mull over - was this person a professional carder, or someone trying to prove not all cyber-crime is slick?

The information has reportedly started making the rounds on Warez sites. The incident, Boyd wrote on a corporate blog, has the makings of someone who came across a stockpile of sensitive data and was trying to distribute it quickly - or a pro who messed up badly.

Usually, carders - people who trade in credit card information - tend to arrange data uniformly, he noted. But here, some of the records included no more than card details while others featured a name, address, PIN number and other information, leading Boyd to guess that the data may have come from a back-end payment system.

Extensive searching on the information contained in the posts turned up little, save for an e-mail address that led researchers to a pro carding forum - now offline - where someone was offering up a small sample of private data at an asking price of \$30,000 to \$50,000 for UK and U.S. bank log-ins.

Calling it a case of stupid criminals at work in cyberspace, Boyd

nonetheless told eWEEK that allowing such forums to operate gives security professionals and law enforcement a chance to keep an eye on crooks.

"Typically, combining hosts who are happy to profit from illegal activity with forums using nothing more complicated than secret subsections will create the perfect environment for criminals to buy and sell data," he said. "It's hard to gain access, and if you go down the route of shutting the forums down, you risk them going deeper underground and losing all your intel sources."

Ron Paul Spam Traced To Ukrainian Botnet

Ron Paul is not a botmaster. Security researchers have shut down a network of computers responsible for sending out nearly 200 million spam messages supporting the U.S. presidential candidate last month, and after analyzing the server's software, it's clear that there is no such thing as a Ron Paul botnet, according to Joe Stewart, a senior security researcher with SecureWorks.

"It probably wasn't even set up by a Ron Paul supporter," he said. "This whole system has been around since 2004. This [spam] somehow just landed in this underground spam economy."

When spam first surfaced, trumpeting Paul as the winner of a recent Republican presidential debate, the fact that it was being sent via illegally infected machines raised eyebrows. The spam messages have never been directly linked to the Ron Paul campaign, which has denied any involvement in the incident.

The Texas congressman is considered a long-shot contender for the Republican presidential nomination, but he has a strong Internet presence. His videos are popular on YouTube, and Ron Paul fundraisers recently were able to raise more than \$4 million in a 24-hour period.

Stewart published an analysis of the botnet on Tuesday, connecting it to an Eastern European spammer known as "spm," whose company, Elphisoft, sends unsolicited e-mail using a network of about 3,000 infected "botnet" PCs. Stewart believes that spm, and many of the people involved in his operation, are located in the Ukraine.

The botnet server used to manage the Ron Paul spam was located in the United States and shut down in mid-November, giving researchers a chance to examine the software on the machine, Stewart explained.

Apparently spm rented out his botnet to a middleman, a spammer calling himself "nenastnyj," who has also sent out messages promoting pornography, online gambling, and male enhancement technology. He probably paid spm between \$100 and \$1,000 to send out the Ron Paul mailing, Stewart said.

It is nearly impossible to figure out who nenastnyj really is, but Stewart made a few guesses, based on his previous spam jobs stored on the server. "Nenastnyj appears just to be a small-time spammer who doesn't write the spam software," he said. "Basically he just makes money by finding sponsors and then becoming a mailer for them and using someone else's mail service to send it."

This botnet is one of 16 controlled by spm's servers, which use a user-friendly, Web-based application called Reactor Mailer to manage spam mailings. "The interface is pretty slick; it's Web 2.0-enabled," Stewart said. "It shows that they really do view this as a business and they put out a quality product. They are trying to make a lot of money on this."

The spammers used a malicious Trojan horse program called Trojan.Srizbi to take control of computers and link them into the botnet.

Experts Warn of Online Coupon Scams

Online shopping scams could become a major security threat in the weeks leading up to Christmas as consumers eagerly type in credit card numbers, click on discount coupons and participate in online promotions, security experts worry.

Instead of moneysaving deals, e-mailed coupons could lead recipients into "phishing" schemes where the consumer is redirected to a copycat site, whose real purpose is to siphon the user's credit card information, passwords and other financial data, IBM Corp. security executive Christopher Rouland warned.

"That 50-percent-off, one-use coupon could go to a compromised computer in Kazakhstan," said Rouland, chief technology officer for Internet security systems at Big Blue, which controls more than 1 million "phish trap" e-mail addresses that discovered 867,000 scams in the third quarter. "The quality of malware is very high."

IBM is urging online shoppers not to click on links within e-mails that appear to come from an online retailer. Instead, open a new Web browser, go to the retailer's site, navigate to special coupons or promotions and see if it's there.

Brian Trombley, a product manager for computer security firm McAfee Inc., said holiday phishing scams are shaping up to be an "extraordinary problem" this season.

No single giant retailer has been a particular target of holiday attacks; eBay Inc.'s PayPal unit is still an overwhelming target of scammers.

"The scammers are getting more and more sophisticated," Trombley said. "They're using better English, they're getting better at copying real sites and making their site look like the real thing."

Check Scams Thrive, Especially Online

Check schemes are spreading across the USA as scamsters exploit the popularity of online auction, dating and social-networking sites to find victims.

The scams have grown so prevalent that the Postal Inspection Service has

launched a TV and print campaign - its largest-ever anti-fraud drive - to alert consumers. Overseas investigators, working with U.S. postal inspectors, have arrested 77 people this year and intercepted \$2.1 billion in counterfeit checks headed for the USA. And the Federal Trade Commission sued two Canadian companies in October, accusing them of using fake checks to bilk U.S. consumers.

Even as consumers reduce their use of checks, the creation of fake checks is booming. Fraudsters are using them to pay for goods advertised online or to convince people that they've won sweepstakes prizes.

"Fake checks seem to have really peaked in the last couple of years," says Steven Baker, head of the Federal Trade Commission's Midwest region. "When (fraudsters) find something that works, the word spreads."

If customers lose money because of check fraud, their banks won't bail them out. But if those customers can't repay, the banks get stuck with the losses.

No one knows how much money customers have lost from bogus checks. But last year, banks alone lost \$271 million from fake checks - a 160% jump from three years earlier, according to the American Bankers Association.

Customers are likely losing much more than that from check fraud, according to the National Consumers League, because some consumers present checks at check-cashing centers as well as at banks. All types of check-related fraud cost banks \$969 million in 2006, the ABA says.

Counterfeit checks have become the second-most-common Internet fraud and the top telemarketing fraud reported to the National Consumers League since it began tracking such scams in 2003. On average, victims lose \$3,000 to \$4,000 per scam, the league says.

In one common scam, fraudsters contact sellers at online auction sites, saying they want to buy an item. They say they'll give the sellers a check for more than the sale price, explaining that the excess money must be wired to a third party who will handle the shipping.

The fraudsters often don't bother to claim the item. They just want consumers to wire money to them quickly, before their own checks bounce, says Susan Grant, director of the National Consumers League's fraud center.

Generally, banks must make funds available to their customers one to five days after a check is deposited - even if the check has yet to clear, Grant says. But because it could take weeks for a check to actually clear, the victim might not find out that the check is a fake until it's too late.

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